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The Quick: David MacDougall and Reflections on Relative Speed

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ALEX FATTAL <> DAVID MACDOUGALL <> FILM <> JIE <>
JUDITH MACDOUGALL <> SPEED <> SUBTITLES <>
UNDER THE MEN'S TREE

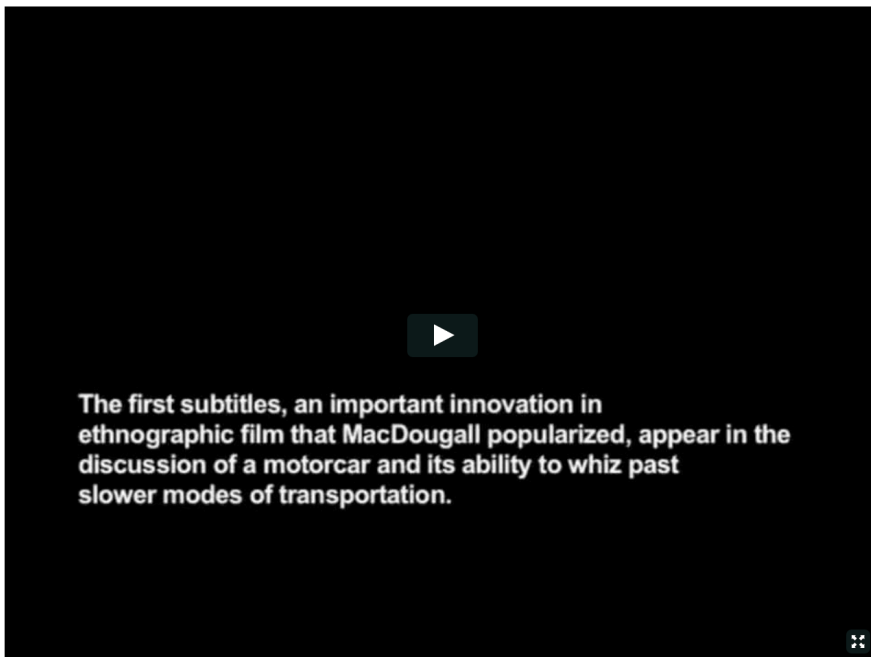


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Given David MacDougall's interest in "the quick," a conceptual category that he coins (and could be considered the younger cousin of Walter Benjamin's "optical unconscious"), the discussion of cars and relative speed that so strongly marks his 1974 short, *Under the Men's Tree*, takes on conceptual undertones. In MacDougall's own words, "The 'quick' is finally a metaphor for the film itself – a product of this heightened consciousness" (1998:54). But of course heightened consciousness implies lowered consciousness; that is banality, boredom, and distraction. When wearing the hat of ethnographic filmmaker, MacDougall masterfully numbs and elevates consciousness through his redactions behind the viewfinder and in the cutting room. When MacDougall is wearing the hat of ethnographic film theorist, he is acutely aware of what he calls "complicities of style," that is the epistemological consequences of techniques, genres, schools, and other taxonomies of cinematic practice. As both maker and theorist he playfully prods the viewer and reader to question those complicities. *Under the Men's Tree* viewed in conjunction with MacDougall's concept of "the quick" offers an illustrative case of the intertwined relationship between maker and critic, as they are the same person. Through text and film MacDougall is in dialectical relation with himself, urging the viewer to meditate on speed (rhythm) and impact, "the quick."



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But this effect of heightened consciousness, which could be rephrased as a piercing insight into another culture or a “thick depiction” (Taylor 1996:86) is heavily inflected by both MacDougall’s montage, which follows a conventional narrative trajectory, and his own presence in the scene.

How many cars does MacDougall own? Does MacDougall generally travel on foot? He and his ticking photographic machine is a symbol of urbanity, modernity, and places much further afield than Longor or Mora Ekoré. Has his very presence prompted the whole discussion? If so, is the revelatory aspect diminished, diluted, distorted?

MacDougall the theorist notes that “Beyond observational cinema lies the possibility of a participatory cinema, bearing witness to the event of the film and making strengths of what most films are at pains to conceal” (1998:134). Indeed, MacDougall integrates a reflexive moment, “Quiet, he’s filming,” into his mostly observational piece, prompting these very questions. But like the unresolved discussion, “you can no more compare people to cars than to the wind,” the reflexive moment, uttered in a joking tone, is ambivalent. How has the conversation under the tree been inflected by MacDougall’s presence and that of his camera? The unanswerable question is central as the strength of the film, particularly at the time of its release was its observational claim to immediacy. The impact of immediacy is precisely at the core of what MacDougall calls “the quick.” But MacDougall the theorist acknowledges, “the illusion of the transparent writer,” and thereby the illusion of a depiction so thick that the filmmaker disappears (1998). Without a synthesis forthcoming, and with the crutch of narrative convention persisting, MacDougall the filmmaker challenges MacDougall the theorist to revise and nuance his concept of “the quick,” because as Lokwara, a key discussant under the men’s tree confidently asserts—speed is relative.

Produced by Lan Li

References:

MacDougall, David. 1998. *Transcultural Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Taylor, Lucien. 1996. *Iconophobia: How Anthropology Lost it at the Movies*. Transition, 69.

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